



Today's Workplace: is it a Grievance, Gripe or Just Total Frustration?

These are hard times for some members. The economy is terrible, furloughs and/or layoffs are in some member's future and members are struggling to manage the effects of these stresses on a personal level.

As a steward, you may be approached by members with a workplace issue they want your advice on. It is important to identify the best way to deal with any issue. Sometimes at first glance, an issue may appear to be a grievance, but after taking another look, you may have questions. A good first step is to look at the difference between a "grievance" and a "gripe."

Grievance

A grievance is generally a violation of the collective bargaining agreement; a violation of "past practice;" or violation of a written precedent as contained in an employer policy or settlement agreement from a prior grievance.

Just a Gripe

Gripes are issues that are important to members, but do not violate the bargaining agreement or past practice. Sometimes it is just "management mis-management." Addressing gripes can be just as important as filing grievances. While you can't file a grievance in these instances, you may have other avenues available that allow you, the steward, to creatively solve a problem.

- **File a Grievance**

Yes, it may already have been determined that the issue at hand is not subject to the grievance provisions of the contract. However, sometimes it makes sense to file a grievance anyway. The advantage for the member is that it forces management to listen to their concerns.

- **Call for a Labor Management Meeting**

Most of Local 17's bargaining agreements have language which allows the union to call for a Labor Management meeting.

The union can take members to these meetings on "work time." Employees get to have a voice in the workplace via these kinds of meetings. Management is forced to enter into discussions about whatever the issue is. Usually there is someone in the meeting from the Labor Relations department.

For example, many "gripe" issues at the City of Seattle have been discussed in Labor Management meetings. Generally, the results have been as good and sometimes better than if the grievance process was followed.

The most important thing to remember when addressing a gripe is to explain to members an alternative plan to address their concerns, and to approach management with the explanation that resolving the gripe is in the mutual interest of both labor and management.

Finally, when a member comes to you for help, remember that you can't solve every problem.

These are the most trying times in this country since the 1930s. Not only are there layoffs and furloughs in the future for some, in many families, one parent has already lost a job. Union members need to support each other and sometimes the best way to do that is to just be available for a conversation when someone needs to talk.
— *By Local 17 Union Representative Diana Douglas*